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ABSTRACT

A questionnaire sent to universities across the United States, asking for information about remedial English programs, yielded responses from 85 universities. Analysis of the responses resulted in the formulation of seven rules for organizing a successful remedial English course: (1) Don't bind the course to a textbook. (2) Aim the course toward the writing of sentences that are related to one another. (3) Begin the course with a diagnostic test and a writing sample, and start work on some common ground of error. (4) Plan to revise your plan. (5) Keep the students active. (6) Work on a tutorial basis as much as possible. (7) Have the students write every day. In planning a remedial composition program based on these rules, two sets of variables must be considered: those related to the university system--class size, time allotted for the course, and teacher competence--and those related to the students--attendance, attitude, and ability. Experiences in conducting a remedial composition program demonstrate that such a program can be successful. (GW)

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# Planning the Remedial Composition Curriculum

One of the ways that I tried to prepare for today was by sending a questionnaire to universities across the country asking for information on their remedial English programs. (I realize that many people feel that remedial is a pejorative word, but I do not use it or think of it as one.) I had hoped that the responses to my questions would suggest a way to organize a successful curriculum within the restrictions established by university and department policies, student ability, and teacher skills. One of the questions I asked was "What text are you using?" I had hoped that one single textbook would appear with some consistency on the responses. I don't know why I was that optimistic because my own experience showed me that we changed textbooks every year and that I changed the way I taught the course every quarter. As the responses came in, I began to keep a textbook tally, but my list grew longer and longer, and no text received more than three votes, and most were only mentioned once. At the end of the race, out of eighty-five responses, I had fifty-three different textbooks listed, the winner being Blumenthal's English 3200 with five votes. I do not think that five votes indicates any real consistency in judgment. In fact, the only consistency after all was that twenty-four universities do not use any particular book but rely on a variety of texts or use their own material or use primarily the students' own work. I therefore allowed myself a first rule: DON'T BIND THE COURSE TO A TEXTBOOK.

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Another question that I asked was "What is the focus of your curriculum? Is it the sentence, the paragraph, or the essay?" Only nine universities answered that they restrict their courses to the sentence level. All the rest at some time within their course move to the paragraph, and a fourth of them move on to the essay. I thought that I had found some clear-cut distinctions, but when I looked more closely at some of the course descriptions, I discovered that some departments require 350-word paragraphs whereas others require 250-word essays. Ignoring the obvious problem of defining the paragraph and the essay, I formulated a second rule: AIM THE COURSE TOWARD WRITING SENTENCES THAT ARE RELATED TO ONE ANOTHER.

Now that I had a specific goal, I had to determine where and how to start. My responses, however, were disturbingly vague. I kept running into comments such as these: "We focus on whatever the student requires." Or "We strongly believe that each student must be taken where he/she is and that one gets to be a better writer by writing." Or "We start with the individual student's problem." These statements sounded a bit like Alice's description of a Caucus-race when she said: "There was no 'One, two, three and away!' but they began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over." Most of my colleagues seemed to think, however, that a diagnostic test and a writing sample were the best way to determine where to start the race. Although the results of these tests reflect an incredibly broad range of abilities, there is some common ground of error that can be the basis for the first week's work. Some students may have problems with agreement errors or spelling, but perhaps all have problems with recognizing or joining

independent clauses. Thus my third rule was BEGIN THE COURSE WITH A DIAGNOSTIC TEST AND WRITING SAMPLE, AND START TO WORK ON THOSE COMMON AREAS OF ERROR.

From this position I could make up a syllabus for the first week of class and perhaps a tentative syllabus for the entire quarter. After all, by classifying the types of errors in a class, I could determine the direction of the course. I felt deceptively secure. Again, my own experience told me that the quarter never proceeds in a systematic, predictable fashion. For example, this fall one of my colleagues taught the remedial course for the first time, using my materials and syllabus. I laid out on the table in my office dated exercises and handouts that we would use throughout the quarter, but by the third week I was taking handouts away from him ten minutes before class and saying,"We aren't doing this today. They need another day to make their thesis statements clearer." Being a methodical person who always followed his own syllabus to the letter, he responded with horror and a cry of "You can't do this." I tried to explain that it was not that the course had no structure but that its structure developed out of the students' needs day by day. I still think that distributing a syllabus at the beginning of the quarter is a good idea because administrators, students, and I all feel secure with that neat plan in front of us. It also gives those who are absent on a particular day a specific assignment to do. But if I march blindly through the syllabus to the end, I usually finish the quarter almost alone because only one or two students can keep pace with me. I have had students ask me in the last week of the term when we were discussing how to correct dangling modifiers, "How do you know what the subject of the sentence is?" Then I've realized that I had been guilty of marching blithely

along ahead of the band, unaware that the band had not learned the routine. My fourth rule then was PLAN TO REVISE YOUR PLAN.

I leafed back through my questionnaires hoping to find a consensus of responses on putting a plan into practice. Most of the detailed answers were along these lines: "At this level students work in very small groups or in one-to-one tutorial sessions." Or "The program is genuinely tutorial." Or "Students write--then a teacher talks with them about the papers--then they write again." These responses suggested two things: that teachers should encourage students to be active rather than passive and that individual work with each student is essential. To be active rather than passive means that the student does not hear the instructor's formal lecture on relative clauses or logic. Instead the teacher has to keep asking questions, has to put the students at the board, has to arrange them in small groups, in teams, in pairs. They should be either talking or writing or listening, and when they are listening, it should be to something that is in response to or related to what they have beeen saying or writing. Much of this listening, then, takes place in the one-to-one tutoring session. Although the entire class might have the same general writing assignment, at the tutoring sessions the instructor works on the specific problems of the individual student.

These problems include the traditional errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, and syntax, but the instructor also encounters problems that he never expected to face. I had one student who could not make lower case p's, b's, and r's, nor could he write a single recognizable sentence. By the end of the quarter, however, he could write a testimonial to me

which read: "Mrs. Jenning taught me to write. I never thout I could. I came to college for basketball. But I learned writting to." The student had omitted the final s on my name and had misspelled thought, writing, and too, but he had written four complete sentences that focused on a single idea. Although I knew that he would never complete four years of college, I counted him one of my successes. In the same year, I also had a student who had a 630 Verbal SAT score but had graduated in the bottom one per cent of his high-school class because he was an alcoholic. He wrote beautifully when he was sober, but he finished the course by correspondence from the Marion State Hospital. As a teacher I did him very little good; his first and last papers were on the same level and had nothing to do with anything that I had ever said to him. Obviously, these are extreme examples, but the range of abilities and needs is still very wide in any class, and the only way the instructor can work with this range is on the individual level. Thus I determined that rules five and six should be KEEP THE STUDENTS ACTIVE and WORK ON A TUTORIAL BASIS AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE.

According to those in most of the universities that I heard from, the major subject discussed at these tutorial conferences is the student's own writing. Instead of producing a single, neat theme on Fridays as one does in many of the traditional Freshman Composition classes, the student in the remedial class is working in conference with the teacher throughout the week to prepare his essay. This student is writing rough drafts; revising them with the instructor's guidance, sometimes several times; writing the final paper; and then editing it, again with the instructor's help.

In between times, he is transcribing dictation; he is doing free writing in an ungraded journal; he is writing impromptu paragraphs. Not a day should pass that the student doesn't manage to fill up at least one page of paper. Most of the students are in this class in the first place because they have had very little experience with any kind of writing. Based on this information, I made my last rule: KEEP THE STUDENTS WRITING EVERY DAY. And, I should add, read everything that they write.

I had now formulated a precise little list of seven rules for organizing a successful remedial English course: 1) Don't bind the course to a textbook; 2) Aim the course toward writing sentences that are related to one another; 3) Begin the course with a diagnostic test and a writing sample, and start work on those common areas of error; 4) Plan to revise your plan; 5) Keep the students active; 6) Work on a tutorial basis as much as possible; 7) Keep the students writing every day.

This list gave me a sense of security, but it is a security much like the one I have with my syllabus because I know that it completely ignores two sets of variables: 1) those related to the university system and 2) those related to the students themselves.

The first set, those related to the university, involves class size, time allotted, and teacher competency. Obviously the classes must be small in order to work on this essential one-to-one level. Most universities regard fifteen as a small class size whereas ten or twelve are as many students as an instructor can work with and be at all effective. If the teacher splits the ideal class of ten in half once a week for a tutoring day, he can still devote only ten minutes to each student. But when

administrators force enrollment up to and beyond eighteen, then the teacher wails in despair. His colleagues who do not teach the course often have no sympathy with his distress because they see remedial English classes as featherbedding: after all there are fewer students and shorter writing assignments.

The second university variable is the time allotted for teaching the course. As I read Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations, I noted different ideas that I was going to lift for my own classes, but I also noted that somehow I couldn't fit everything into my ten-week, five-days-a-week quarter. It wasn't until I had nearly finished the book that I discovered the problem. Ms. Shaughnessy writes: "Ideally, the students in this course should meet in a workshop setting five days a week for at least one class period a day, preferably for two." She goes on to set up the course based on three fifteen-week semesters. I calculated quickly that she thought that one should have 450 hours with students whereas I have only fifty. What a luxury four hundred more hours would be. Again, the job of convincing both the university and the students that we should have more than ten weeks of remedial work seems impossible. While it is true at our school that most students can repeat the course without penalty, repetition isn't precisely what they need. They need the same material, but examined at a slower pace.

The final university variable is the teacher himself. Who this teacher is has already been discussed. The two points that I would like to make in this area are first that no one should teach this course who thinks that doing so will give him a lighter teaching load and second, that the instructor should have as much patience with the students' limited

background as the students have with his. For instance, this past bitter cold January I was late for class several days because I had trouble getting my car started in the morning. When it was time to write the process analysis theme, I received three excellent papers that were written simply but not condescendingly on how to use jumper cables. I let the writer know that I was very grateful.

Besides the university's limitations, there are also three major student variables: attendance, attitude, and ability. The attendance problem in some ways hinges on university policy. Under a free-cut system, an eight o'clock class in the dead of winter is going to have no more than two-thirds present most of the time. The students' public school experience has re-inforced this habit because too often a missed day did not mean missed work. We have all had students say, "I'm sorry I wasn't here yesterday. Did I miss anything?" The assumed answer is "No, of course not."

The second student variable is attitude. There may be fifteen different responses to being in the class from fifteen different students. They are often delighted, self-confident, eager, and attentive, but they are also just as often afraid, angry, insulted, and indifferent. Pitching the tone of the class to make everyone relax yet willing to work requires abilities in acting and psychology as well as composition. This problem, I believe, is the most difficult one to deal with because often the attitude that the student projects is the very opposite of the one he actually feels. By gearing a response to an apprently hostile student, the teacher may reinforce the student's real feelings of insecurity.

I had a student write on his diagnostic essay that he was in the class by mistake because the testing center had made an error on his SAT scores

and that he had no intention of following the Mickey Mouse routine that I had outlined on the syllabus. Feeling somewhat defensive myself at the moment, I started to write a rather cool remark across his paper about the number of errors he had when I realized that I was stereo-typing on very flimsy evidence someone who was going to be working with me for ten weeks. It's true that he could have been a hostile student whose attitude might have demoralized the class for the whole quarter, but there was no way for me to know. The instructur then can lose a student for the entire term if his perception of that student is faulty.

I'd like to add, however, that we expected a great deal of resentment when we started our program, but there has been very little. The students in general have been enthusiastic and positive, sometimes almost too much so. One colleague who took my class for a day said, "It's like trying to teach 'Let's Make a Deal.'"

The third student variable is ability. This is the area that the instructor feels most confident about assessing. He might catch himself pigeon-holing students according to their errors on diagnostic work: this one has subject-verb problems; that one can't develop his ideas. But this hasty diagnosis often overlooks the source of these errors: the student with subject-verb problems may actually be one who omits the final s consistently on plural nouns and on third person singular verbs; the student with poor development may be one who thinks clearly and thoroughly but also slowly. Therefore in a limited time period he may write down only his main ideas. To understand the student's abilities and problems, the instructor must reserve judgment until he has talked with the student and has watched him

write. The instructor must also guard against his own response to the range of abilities. It is often too easy to spend just a little time with and then dismiss those who write mediocre but relatively clean essays or to simply hand exercises to those who seem hopelessly enmeshed in multiple errors. Thus the teacher is able to spend more time with those on middle ground who then appear to make remarkable improvements. Those students at either end of the scale require more time instead of less because explaining clearly how to improve their writing is much more difficult than explaining the common errors of the middle group.

Finally, all of my suggestions seem very vague. I have given you no text, no system, no short-cut hints, no time schedule. But that is where we are in this program. Although I sometimes feel a day-to-day despair, I can see that we have been basically successful. Our program has been in existence for five years. We can now look at our first class, the class of '72, and see that 56% have graduated, and another 20% are still in school. Of the remaining 24%, a number have transferred to other schools or have stopped out for a year, a fairly common practice. The percentage of graduates is higher than for the regular freshmen and much higher than any of us anticipated. On this optimistic note I could end with a pat word of advice--"Be flexible," but I think a better one is "Try not to show surprise."